

Work History News



A Bridge Between Past and Present

Volume 36 No 2 Summer/Fall 2019

The Clara Lemlich Awards 2019

By Erika Perez

One hundred and eight years later, LaborArts and the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition honor five amazing women who have worked long and hard towards a better, safer and fair environment. The Ninth Annual Clara Lemlich Awards was held at the Puffin Gallery for Social Activism at the Museum of the City of New York on Monday May 6, celebrating Elba Cabrera, Philoine Fried, Melissa Freeman, Doris Diether and Ronnie Eldridge. In a room filled with women who have dedicated their lives to see their community grow into a place where people can speak up, get the assistance they need and fight for their own rights, it was inspiring.

The reception on the Museum terrace featured 50+ members of the New York City Labor Chorus singing with beautiful voices and powerful words. Before heading in to the award ceremony guests could tour the museum's new exhibition *City of Workers, City of Struggle: How Labor Movements Changed New York*.

Inspiration personified

It was an honor to be in the same room as the honorees, women in their eighties, nineties and hundreds. In the words of Elba Cabrera "I believe very strongly in the young people because, they're the ones that are going to change the things that are happening now." She talked about the Clara Lemlich Award



2019 Lemlich Award recipients getting their due on May 6.

being a tribute to the people that have come before her and will come after. Known in the Bronx as *madrina de las artes*, this legendary supporter of Latino artists knows the potential our generation has, to fix and improve the many social, political and economic issues that are happening at our work place, schools and in our community.

Dr. Melissa Freeman inspired us as she linked her grandfather's cruel separation from his mother to the cruel separations of families occurring today at our borders and in our jails. Her ongoing work challenged everyone in the room to do more – at 93 she still practices medicine, seeing patients and also traveling to work in an opioid addiction clinic.

Greenwich Village housing activist Doris Diether, the longest serving community board member in Manhattan, mentioned her first civic fight – against Robert Moses, when he was about to undermine free Shakespeare in the park.

She also mentioned current efforts on behalf of affordable housing in the city, urging the audience to participate and to always vote in every single election.

Ronnie Eldridge, feminist politician and activist, served for over a decade in the City Council and has for a long time now produced a weekly talk show. She was not alone in mentioning the playground as a place where women find their voices. Her advice to the next generation is to always speak up, to do your research and then use it to make the case – and not take as long as she did to know that you can do it.

These women show the myriad ways women have devoted their lives to the public good, in the tradition of Clara Lemlich. They lifted the spirits of the standing room only audience, and inspired many to renew their efforts.

Erika Perez is a New Jersey City University student, majoring in English Creative Writing

Philoine Fried honored with Clara Lemlich award

By Shanika Carlies

Philoine Fried is 102 years old, but isn't planning on slowing down anytime soon. She is a founding member of the New York Labor History Association, served as a treasurer until just a few years ago, and remains an engaged member today. Philoine received a 2019 Clara Lemlich Award for her life of behind-the-scenes work with the association, with the Jewish Labor Committee, and elsewhere.

The daughter of two extraordinary labor leaders, Bessie Abramowitz and Sidney Hillman, Fried was essentially born into the labor movement. Her parents made sure Phil and her sister knew about the work they were doing. "I used to say," Philoine said with a chuckle, "that I was born with a trade union spoon in my mouth."



Photos by Gary Schoelcher

Philoine Fried—102, and not slowing down!

Becoming a stay at home mother did not deter her from getting involved in union work whenever she had the time. She recalled volunteering at the center where her children went to day care, one of the many union-related elements of life during the era when the social unionism of the garment unions was at its height.

When Fried began work at the Jewish Labor Committee she helped prepare its many historical files for shipment to NYU's Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives in the mid-1980s. She was invaluable in identifying relevant material, and also a great help in deciding what material was best kept with the organization. Some of the first papers she worked on ended up being included as the first exhibition about the JLC at the Jewish Museum.

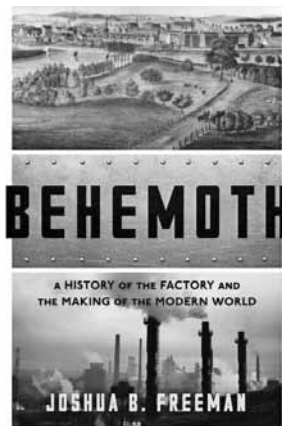
Philoine Fried has sound advice for young women today who want to make a difference in the world. "I suppose it would be, for them to have some notion of themselves, some notion of what they want to be...they have to talk to themselves."

Shanika Carlies is a Brooklyn College Journalism major.

Behemoth - Book talk

JOSH FREEMAN'S BOOK, *BEHEMOTH: A History of the Factory and The Making of the Modern World* has garnered terrific accolades. Best-selling author Beth Macy wrote that it "should be required reading for all Americans," and the noted historian Eric Foner called it "remarkable...if you want to know where the world we live in came from, this is a good place to start." On May Day, the New York Labor History Association and the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies co-sponsored a book talk, and Freeman saluted the holiday in his opening remarks. "May Day! What could be more appropriate?"

While factories and the factory system used to garner a lot of attention, the topic has fallen out of favor, he said. Yet factories are central to our lives. "We live in a factory world," he said. "Our



clothes, our food, our medicines, our cars, our electronics are all produced in factories." This centrality and the modern world of the factory floor was starkly underscored in China, in 2010, when young workers between the ages of 17 and 25 took their own lives at Foxconn, the company that assembles

Apple's elegantly designed products. The juxtaposition of these universally popular products, the iPhones and iPads, with the 14 suicides showed "the human cost of the world we live in," he said.

His talk went full circle, covering "the long sweep, in time and geography, of the industrial system." The earliest mills went from hundreds of workers to thousands, when William Blake wrote about the

"dark, satanic mills, and eminences such as James Boswell and Daniel Defoe treated them as tourist sites. The growth of the system brought about "an infrastructure of modern life... a social and cultural infrastructure." A

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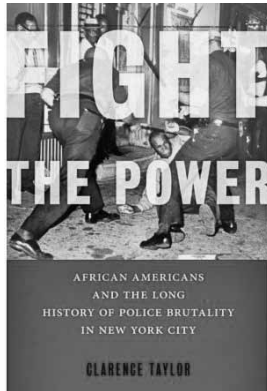


Work History News is published twice per year to keep NYLHA members informed about our organization's work and labor history events in New York. For more information, visit us at newyorklaborhistory.org.

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Fight the Power! – Book Talk

ABNER LOUIMA;
AMADOU DIALLO;
Eric Garner: These names live on in infamy within the recent history of police brutality in NYC. They had many predecessors. Clarence Taylor's book, *Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City*, focuses



on the decades of black resistance to this pervasive behavior. The New York Labor History Association and the Frederick Ewen Center co-sponsored a book talk by Professor Taylor at the Wagner Labor Archives, NYU, on April 9.

As Taylor describes in his book, “Labor played a significant role in the Diallo protests.” At the time, Dennis Rivera, president of Local 1199, United Healthcare Workers East of the SEIU, said that many of his members were victims of police brutality in their communities. Other unions joined the protests, including DC 37, AFSCME, and the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys/UAW Local 2325. However, as NYLHA member Gary Goff, an associate vice president of the DC 37 Retirees Association, one of the many labor activists who turned out for the book talk pointed out, “a major stumbling block to labor organizing is divisions in the working class. The number 1 division in the U.S. is race. Clarence Taylor’s book points to a key

example – the long history of police brutality to African-Americans in our city. That organized labor has mostly sidestepped this issue is both scandalous and self-defeating.”

The talk focused on the groups that don’t usually get attention. The black press, and in particular, *The People’s Voice*, a newspaper founded by Adam Clayton Powell, dug deeper than the white-owned press into these incidents. They got eye witnesses, and examined the biographies of the people that were attacked. While the white-owned press treated the black victims as if they were criminals, the left analysis of the *People’s Voice* pushed a narrative that the police only attacked black people *because* they were black.

Appeal to the United Nations

The Communist Party was also a major contributor to framing the issues of police brutality. Benjamin Davis, a member of the NYC Council, and William Paterson, both members of the National Civil Rights Congress, labeled the brutality “the northern form of lynching,” social terror inflicted on members of the black community. In 1951, Paterson and Paul Robeson put out a publication, “We Charge Genocide,” and presented it to the United Nations. It included dozens and dozens of attacks.

Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam also approached police brutality with novel strategies. While the usual analysis depicts this as a search for publicity, they did more than just confront the police. They were involved in litigation, negotiations, and de-escalation. One famous attack that took place in 1957, the Johnson-Hinton case, was included in Spike Lee’s film, *Malcolm X*. The Nation of Islam joined forces with the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund. “The idea was to make it very expensive for the city,” said Taylor.

One strategy to control police behavior was the Civilian Complaint Review Board. Mayor John Lindsay’s proposal to establish one after the 1964 rebellion in Harlem led to an expensive and virulently racist campaign by the police to oppose it. The referendum vote in 1966 defeated the proposal by 3 to 1, and through this, the police learned an important lesson about political power. Not until Mayor Dinkins did another mayor attempt to establish a civilian complaint review board.

Taylor discussed recent history, including the Stop, Frisk and Ask policies of the Bloomberg and De Blasio administrations and its effects. A lively question and answer session concluded the program. “There are ways of giving people control over how the police act,” he said. Eric Garner lost his life in July 2014 and his case drags on and on. The search for effective strategies against police brutality continues.

Behemoth

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different sense of time was required and became part of this system, along with the exploitation of women and children. Marx and Engels wrote about the creation of a new social class.

Freeman described the developments in automobile production. Auto assembly went from 12 hours to turn out a car to 93 minutes with the birth of the

assembly line. Henry Ford’s huge plants in Highland Park and Detroit attracted enormous attention. The murals of Diego Rivera, the photographs of Margaret Bourke White, “ultimately are celebratory. Ford’s factories became a template around the world, and even in the Communist world. Leon Trotsky viewed the factories as a way to abolish poverty. The Bolsheviks equated industry with

progress and modernity,” when the Gorky auto plant in the USSR, which produced the first Model-A it was seen as fighting backwardness. An oral history recorded the stories of auto workers in a Stalingrad tractor factory and Margaret Bourke White took photos of this factory.

The modern system of outsourcing production, of sub-contracting and

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Taking the Lead: Labor and Global Warming

By Jane LaTour

Reporting by Josh Barnett

As glaciers melt and the government rips up environmental regulations, the annual labor history conference on May 11 took on a big topic: Labor and Global Warming. Co-sponsored by the Wager Labor Archives / Tamiment Institute at NYU, the goal of the NYLHA's annual conference, "Taking the Lead: Labor and Global Warming," was to unearth labor's connection to environmental activism. Aside from labor's green activists, this is a hidden history, and most people remain unaware of it.

Labor's roots in climate movement

The first panel focused on the historical component. Donn Mitchell, author of *Tread the City's Streets Again: Frances Perkins Shares Her Theology*, delivered an excellent paper on Walter Reuther – "When Country Wasn't Cool" – Turns out, the leader of the UAW was an environmentalist well before the first Earth Day in 1970. "Way back in 1952, Reuther appeared before the platform committees of both the Democratic and Republican parties, calling for public policies to assure soil conservation, protection of the water supply, and prevention of de-forestation – things we still need today," he said. Mitchell, who began his career as an environmental affairs reporter, traced Reuther's commitment to the environment throughout his career. "In 1965, the union hosted a major conference on water quality, entitled "United Action for Clean Water," followed by the creation of the union's Department of Conservation and Resource Development." Reuther and the UAW played a big role in making the first Earth Day a reality. Sadly, he died three months later.

Irene HongPing Shen, a former high school science teacher, discussed the work of the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, and its history of bringing unions together around the globe to address the issue of sustainable sources of energy. She stressed the importance of



Photo by Martha Foley

Kimberly Schiller (L-R), Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez, Chris Erickson and Zakia Elliott.

partnerships and the necessity of having workers and their organizations at the table as policies are being developed. She pointed to the example of the ATU, which was the first union to oppose the Keystone Pipeline. Shen described the model fight being waged by South African unions for publicly-owned utilities, among other strategies. "The unions are fighting to benefit the working class," she said.

Jon Forster, head of the DC 37 Climate Justice Committee, spoke about the Labor Network for Sustainability. A member of LNS's planning committee, he traced their history and that of other national and local organizations involved in this work, including the Blue/Green Alliance. This initiative was born in the 1990s, when the United Steelworkers started paying attention to the quality of air and the effects of toxic emissions. "The LNS is a climate movement within the labor movement," he explained. Forster spoke about the need to move union leadership to the point where labor can build a real climate movement.

The second panel focused on activism – models where unions are "taking the lead." Zakia Elliott, Program Coordinator for Philadelphia Climate Works, a coalition that works with the Sierra Club, union labor, environmental allies, and community activists. She noted that global warming requires a holistic approach and that all of the stakeholders need to be present at the table. Elliott's group continues to search for ways to work with unions, to bring young people in and to build connections. "One big challenge is

the readiness of the unions – their willingness to take on this struggle," she stated.

Chris Erickson, Business Manager of Local 3, IBEW, began by admitting that he was there for his grandchildren. Erickson described the role of Local 3. It's leadership and commitment stands in contrast to the reluctance on the part of most of the building trades unions to get involved in working toward a "just transition" to green jobs and away from carbon-based fuels. "Labor is divided between jobs and the environment. People feel helpless," and he noted that more people voted for the American Idol [a TV show] than for president. "The IBEW is active and it brings credibility from the building trades. We're working on it."

Need for a new paradigm

President Judy Sheridan-Gonzalez of the New York State Nurses Association, spoke about the potential of the environmental justice movement to unite people. "Climate change is abstract for people," and she discussed the need for a new paradigm for the labor movement. "None of this is possible without educating the members and union democracy," she said. "Health workers start from the point where it affects the members," and then discussed different strategies including direct action, civil disobedience, labor/community coalitions, legislation and fracking moratoriums. "Politicians need to answer to us. We need to believe in ourselves, and in our grandkids."

The third panel looked at the challenges. Eileen Moran, Co-Chair of

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WORKERS' FILM FESTIVAL RECAP

Climate Change is a Labor issue

By Kyle Friend

In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its long-anticipated report, which called to attention the stark changes humanity must immediately make to prevent our planet from experiencing cataclysmic, irreversible consequences stemming from our reliance on planet-destroying fossil fuels.

Spotlight on environment

The paper's conclusions – that we have approximately a dozen years to make radical changes to the way we consume and produce, or else – present an opportunity for working-class people to organize and mobilize to stymie the changes in climate that will disproportionately impact poor and working-class people. The report's dreary outlook makes events like the Workers Unite! Film Festival, and its program on the intersection of labor and the environment, especially relevant and important.

On Saturday, May 11, in a salute to the New York Labor History Association, the festival screened three films exploring the intersection of our shared environment and our relationship to work.

Leau Est La Vie: The Fight at Standing Rock Continues in the Bayou of Louisiana explored the fight for clean water in



the bayous of Louisiana, where Energy Transfer Partners – the company behind the Dakota Access Pipeline – is in the process of building an extension to DAPL in the Atchafalaya Basin. *The Reason We're Still Here* delves into the Youngstown, Ohio, community's efforts to confront and challenge fracking companies, who are poisoning drinking water in the already-beaten-down Mahoning Valley, located in the heart of the Rust Belt.

Toxic Teflon

The final, feature-length film, *The Devil We Know*, was a disturbing look at DuPont's campaign to protect their profits, even at the expense of everyday West Virginians who were experiencing detrimental birth defects and sky-high cancer rates as a result of the company's use of "C8," an industrial chemical used to make Teflon. The film documents the citizens of Parkersburg in their long fight for truth and justice through the lens of

a young man born with birth defects, whose mother worked for DuPont in direct contact with C8 – also known as "PFOA" – during her pregnancy. The fight concludes – on paper – when a class action lawsuit comprised of residents in the water districts around DuPont's plant settled a lawsuit against DuPont in exchange for a measly \$16 million. But the most striking aspect of the well-sourced documentary is how it paints a portrait of how public relations and outright lies facilitated DuPont's legal exoneration from creating and mishandling a chemical now present in the blood of 99.7% of Americans.

If there's one thing the film festival instilled in those who attended, it's the fact that trade unionists can and must do more to protect our planet. While, yes, doing so will require some jobs to be uprooted – some eliminated entirely – one overarching theme from the films stands boldly in the face of those who would prefer to remain within the status quo: there are no good jobs on a dead planet. If working people have a seat at the table, and remain unified in our fight for good jobs and a healthy planet, then we can ensure our communities are not on the menu.

Kyle Friend is Communication Strategist for the OPEIU.

Labor and Global Warming

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the PSC's Environmental Justice Working Group, bluntly discussed the obstacles that limit labor's activity and engagement. While NYSNA's President called for "an approach that looks beyond the next contract," Moran pointed to the narrow focus of most unions, their bureaucratic and conservative nature, and their inability to "connect the dots with what affects union members and the working class." Maritza Silva-Farrell, Executive Director of ALIGN, took aim at the big picture and how to create a sustainable economy that works for everyone. "ALIGN works with labor unions," and she pointed to the

Photo by Martha Foley



ATU's Bruce Hamilton and PSC's Eileen Moran on obstacles to progress.

involvement of Local 3, IBEW in their work. "It shows that it is possible to have debates over complicated issues," she said. "Courage and imagination are required. The future of our grandkids is at stake."

ATU Vice President Bruce Hamilton focused on the strength that the labor movement brings to the climate justice

movement. "We need to bring to bear the power and organization of labor," but noted that, at this point, labor unions are not involved enough. Thanks are due to Irwin Yellowitz and Josh Barnett, and the Conference Planning Committee, especially to Michael Koncewicz, Kimberly Schiller, Joe Doyle, and Martha Foley, who chaired the panel discussions. Jane LaTour chaired the planning committee. This conference was the last public event that will be held in the Reading Room of the Wagner Labor Archives at NYU. The conference was dedicated to the children and grandchildren of the Planning Committee, and "to all the children who inhabit Planet Earth.

May Day Upstate

By Art Fleischner

For the 21st continuous celebration of May Day in the capital district of New York, the Solidarity Committee organized two separate events: a mid-day labor history and music tour and an evening dinner with entertainment and a speaker. The tour started in Townsend Park where about 50 revelers with banners, signs and musical instruments gathered to hear that May Day was originally an American holiday started upon the successful struggle for the eight hour day in 1886. Again this year, Fred Boehrer of the Catholic Worker spoke of Dorothy Day, the founding of the Catholic Worker movement and the need to continue the fight for farm workers in the New York Legislature.

Resistance past and present

With IWW local leader Greg Giorgio banging the drum, the group walked to the New York State East Capital Park where Colin Doniruma regaled the crowd with stories about the local, armed rent strikes in this area during the late 1830's and 1840's. Following that Kristoff DiMaria, Rana Morris, Dan Platt and Greg Giorgio led the folks in singing the Ballad of the Hudson Valley Rent Strike by Ryan Harvey. People then marched over to the Verizon Building where local activists recently helped CWA and IBEW workers conduct another successful strike against this huge corporation.



Photos by Alice Brody

They also stopped at the local Hilton Hotel where a recent action by the Hotel Trades Council ended in victory. Another song – the Picketline Song by Evan Greer buoyed the crowd.

Then the mostly trade union folks moved to the old post office where former postal worker Jim Kaufman spoke

about the 7 day strike in New York City and elsewhere on the East Coast in 1970. This was followed by poet Dan Wilcox reading his poem *Going Postal*. The group ended at Tri-Centennial Park for lunch prepared by Food Not Bombs. This was highlighted by Chris Rees talking about transportation struggles from



the 1877 railroad strike to local actions more recently as well as more singing

Many of these same folks, as well as others coming from work, gathered in the evening at the Capital District Latinos where they were treated to a catered dinner, entertainment by Blue Carreker and Terri Roben, who sang labor songs and led folks in others. The main speaker of the evening was Professor Gabriel Hetland of SUNY Albany He updated people on the recent failed coup in Venezuela, spoke about the different factions in that struggle as well as the response from the left, politicians and the media in the USA. In answering questions he highlighted the harm the USA sanctions were having on the Venezuelan people.

Once again members of the Solidarity Committee of the Capital District were happy to lead another May Day celebration. This was one of many in the USA as well as around the world and was again supported by NYLHA.

Art Fleischner is a NYLHA board member.

Commemorating the Triangle Factory Fire



Photo by Michael Frhang

By Sherry Kane

“This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers... The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 146 of us are burned to death.”

Rose Schneiderman, protesting the Triangle Fire, April 2, 1911¹

On March 25, 2019, several hundred people gathered on the corner of Manhattan’s Greene Street and Washington Place to commemorate the 108th Anniversary of

¹ From: Leon Stein, ed., *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy* (New York: Quadrangle/New Times Book Company, 1977), pp. 196-197. First published in *The Survey*, April 8, 1911.

Behemoth

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the huge factories that produce their products, out of the spotlight, amounts to a kind of revolution, all without heroic overtures. “There’s a kind of diminishment of the human spirit,” said Freeman He spoke about

the Triangle factory fire. Members of 20 different unions, students and community activists joined Workers United to lay flowers in memory of the 146 mostly young, immigrant women who lost their lives at that very spot in 1911.

“As an educator, I think about the importance of remembering those turning points in history that have resulted in societal change,” said the UFT’s Janella Hinds. “And as an activist, in their memories, we fight for safe working conditions, for a voice in the workplace, for laws that demonstrate respect for all of our labor.”

“As tragic as [the fire] was, it was a formative moment in the history of the American labor movement and in the history of progressive legislation to protect workers,” said Congressman Jerrold Nadler, who represents the district. “It shouldn’t take deaths... to create workers’ rights’ legislation, to give workers the right to work in safety, to be compensated fairly.”

the role of labor unions; the turbulent bloody history of the steel mills and the modern fightback against organized labor. “The unions changed everything and made things more equitable.” Consequently, the efforts to establish union-free zones.

NYS Labor Commissioner Roberta Reardon recognized the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition’s efforts to build a memorial at the site to honor workers, women and immigrants and noted that Governor Cuomo has pledged \$1.5 million to help in this effort.

“In many ways, it’s almost unbearable to try and envision what the scene was like on this very street corner on that fateful day back in 1911,” said Reardon. “The state of New York, and indeed the entire nation, is today a stronger place for workers because we refused then, as we refuse now, to allow the tragedy that occurred here to fade in our collective memories.”

Tying the 108-year-old tragedy to today’s struggles, José Chapa of the *Justice for Farmworkers Campaign* reminded us that farmworkers continue to be excluded from the state’s labor laws. He urged passage of the Farmworker Fair Labor Practices Act that would provide them the same basic labor protections that cover almost every other worker in New York.

“The first time I ever stepped foot in a field, I passed out from the heat,” said Chapa. “My dad had to carry me out in order for me to get water...farmworkers are still not allowed to have a union here in New York. Farmworkers still do not have the right to overtime pay in New York. And farmworkers still do not have the right to a day of rest.”

And so, every March 25th, a small crowd gathers at this place to remember the past and fight for the future.

Sherry Kane helps coordinate the yearly Triangle Fire Commemoration. For more info, visit: <http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/>.

“The system of factory labor spans three centuries. It is re-emerging in new forms,” he said. “We are part of this system. This is something we still need to think about.” This story is about reinventing the world. If we did it once,” he noted optimistically, “we can do it again.”

DEBRA E. BERNHARDT LABOR JOURNALISM PRIZE 2019 CALL FOR ENTRIES

THE BERNHARDT PRIZE is an award of \$500 given to an article that furthers the understanding of the history of working people.

Articles focused on historical events AND articles about current issues (work, housing, organizing, health, education) that include historical context are both welcome. The work should be published in print or online between **August 1, 2018 and August 25 2019.**

The 2018 prize went to **Toni Gilpin** for "A Louisville Union Built Its Strength as Blacks, Whites Took on International Harvester," in Louisville Weekly August, 2017.

TO ENTER - visit LaborArts.org/Bernhardt

Deadline: **Sunday August 25, 2019**

The winner will be announced at a forum on labor journalism at NYU's Bobst Library on **Wednesday October 16, 2019, 6 - 8 p.m.**

The award is sponsored by the New York Labor History Association and • LaborArts • Metro New York Labor Communications Council • NYC Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO • Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at NYU's Tamiment Library



The New York Labor History Association was founded in 1976 to bring together New Yorkers interested in the history of working people, their organizations, and their struggles for a better life and a more just society. Too often this history is left out of textbooks and classroom

education. We organize discussion panels and conferences, book talks and movie nights. We celebrate long-time activists and new labor journalists. **Learn more about us at newyorklaborhistory.org — and if you're not a member yet, please join us!**



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